

Kumbh Mela 2021 in India amid Pandemic: Perspectives of Host Community

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Abstract:

Kumbh Mela, one of the largest religious mass gathering events of the world, generated significant debate when it was organized in India amidst the Covid 19 Pandemic. It is well known that the event has a huge emotional, social and economical value. The research presents an investigation into the perspectives of the local community of the host city Haridwar on organizing Kumbh Mela amid the covid-19 pandemic and the consequences faced by them. An extensive literature survey explaining the importance of Kumbh Mela forms the base of research and formulation of research objectives and hypothesis. A pilot survey led to formation of questionnaire and identification of stakeholders viz. shopkeepers, hoteliers, security personnel, health workers and common public who were part of Kumbh Mela on regular basis. Total 109 stakeholders were surveyed with two separate questionnaires for open ended and close responses. The results are analysed using chi square test for hypothesis. The host community facing the high risk acknowledged the event to be of immense cultural, social and economic importance and also seemed to be supporting the Government for organizing the event. In such scenario, cancelling mega events may not be the best choice available. However, in spite of people's support for the event and well drafted SOPs, lack of adequate training and poor execution resulted in change of public opinion. It was found that the people's opinion also changed after experiencing the severe consequences and they were not supportive for hosting such mega events in future during epidemics and pandemics. This paper addresses the complex dichotomy between health risks and gains from the Kumbh Mela, which affects the local community. This paper while understanding perspectives of local community provides significant insights for understanding the crucial host-guest-government relationship during critical situations.

Key Words: Mega event, Kumbh Mela, Religious Tourism, COVID-19

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I. Introduction

The outbreak of COVID-19 pandemic caused massive financial losses across the globe and travel and tourism industry was one of the worst hit (Abbas, et.al, 2021). Tourism has a significant influence on the economies of nations. The industry gets easily disrupted by crisis situations and the COVID-19 pandemic confronted this sensitive industry with unprecedented circumstances (Singh, et.al., 2021). Tourists' travel risk and management perceptions combined with lockdowns leading to travel restrictions brought the industry to a total standstill, resulting in a huge economic crisis (Joshi and Gupta 2021). India is known for its rich cultural heritage and religious tourism is a significant section of travel and tourism industry in India (Menon, et.al., 2021). The cultural tourism in India is rising and re-emerging constantly (Collins-Kreiner, 2020). Kumbh Mela which is known to be the world's largest gathering event has a special place in cultural and religious tourism in India and the world (Quadri & Padala, 2021). Indian Hindu population attends this mega event in huge numbers from historic times for spiritual reasons. It is well established that such events have huge potential for spreading of communicable diseases (Quadri, 2020). During the pandemic, the Government of India's decision to continue with the preplanned Kumbh Mela 2021 is hugely debated as a political blunder. The outbreak of corona virus in the participants of Kumbh Mela and their families is widely published. Local communities are one of the major stakeholders in religious tourism and pilgrimage and it is imperative for the organizers to actively engage with the host community (Lin, 2021). Local people who stay in the cities which are of religious prominence do prefer religious tourists, but other factors like socio-cultural and economic considerations also play an important role. Local host communities and their perceptions on mega religious events like Kumbh Mela 2021 amid the pandemic become extremely prominent.

The research is conducted with the aim to investigate into the perspectives of the local community on organizing Kumbh Mela 2021 amid the pandemic. The research is structured around the following research objectives-

- RO1: To analyze the public opinion on the opportunities and challenges while conducting Kumbh Mela 2021.
RO2: To evaluate the perspectives of local people on post event consequences of Kumbh Mela 2021.

The research objectives are investigated through an extensive literature survey, pilot survey, detailed survey and analyses of data using Chi square test on the formulated hypothesis. The findings provide significant insights for understanding the crucial host-guest-government relationship during critical situations.

II. Literature review

India is a land of festivals. An ancient land drenched in rich culture. Religion is an integral part of India's ethos and it invades all aspects of its people's lives. Hinduism is the majority religion of India and is a polytheistic faith which believes in many gods and goddesses. Hinduism is an inclusive religion and accepts all paths as they lead to the same common goal. Most religions across the world have special significance for pilgrimage. Pilgrimage tourism is often considered the oldest form of tourism. Hinduism has a long tradition of pilgrimage called as Tirtha-yatra ('tour of the sacred fords'). According to the Hindu doctrine travelling for pilgrimage is extremely important and is considered as a duty. People in large numbers travel to festivals, pilgrimage circuits and ritual cleansings to various pilgrimage sites (Singh, 2004). People travel to the 'Sacred site festivals' (*melas*) in India during auspicious astrological period or to celebrate a date commemorating a mythological event. The greatest of these festivals is the Kumbh Mela. *Purna* Kumbh Mela (full/complete Kumbh Mela) is held four times every 12 years on 4 locations across India; it is usually referred simply as Kumbh Mela. *Ardh* Kumbh Mela (half Kumbh Mela) is held every 6 years between two *Purna* Kumbh Melas and Maha Kumbh Mela is held after 12 cycles of the *Purna* Kumbh Mela (Singh, 2006). The Kumbh Mela 2021 was a *purna* kumbh held at Haridwar between 1st and 30th April 2021. Hari-ki-pauri is the most famous *ghat* (auspicious bank) along the Ganges in Haridwar which is the epicenter of all religious activities like the holy dips. It is a densely populated area with various temples, shops, restaurants and hotels where the pilgrims congregate especially during the Kumbh mela. (Fig. 1)



Fig. 1: Kumbh Mela 2021 (Source: NDTV, 2021)

Pilgrimage, religious tourism and festivals are not only important for the tourists or pilgrims but the host community is a prime stakeholder (Chien-PangLin, 2021). For the organizers, policy makers and hosts, Kumbh Mela signifies much more in terms of power and financial gains (Shinde, 2010). Generally Kumbh Mela events are a huge source of income and are big employment generators for the host city. The Kumbh Mela 2019 generated 150 billion rupees. (PTI, 2019).

In order to prepare for the Kumbh Mela 800 hotels and 350 ashrams were geared up in Haridwar to accommodate 1.25 lakh people each day. Provision of 156 square kilometer area was made for people associated with Hospitality, tourism and civil supply. Major permanent infrastructural projects were undertaken in the area to boost tourism like building of bridges, roads and beautification of hari-ki-pauri area (Verma, 2020). For sanitation 11700 toilets and 6674 urinals were made. 157.65 kilometers of roads added to the infrastructural growth of the city and a hospital with 159 beds was specially made for the festival. The government spent 12000 crore rupees for various infrastructural projects. Though the count of estimated daily visitors was reduced from 6 to 1.5 million, some state estimates still estimated the profit to be around 4500-5000 crore rupees (Mahajan, 2021).

Kumbh Mela generates a wide wealth of jobs in the host city. Kumbh Mela 2019 according to Confederation of Indian Industry (CII) aimed to generate 2,50,000 jobs in hospitality sector, 1,50,000 in airlines and airports and 45,000 in travel agencies. Sectors like medical tourism and ecotourism were to generate additional 85,000 jobs. Unorganized sector which comprising tour guides, volunteers and taxi drivers were to add 55,000 jobs according to the CII report (PTI, 2019) (Paul, 2019). Apart from the jobs, small business owners who own road side shops, food stalls etc gain tremendous business because of religious festivals like Kumbh Mela.

Strong measures, standard operating procedures (SOPs) and their implementation are imperative for mass gatherings like Kumbh Mela especially during the times of endemics and pandemics (Blumberg, et.al. 2016). Health and hygiene protocols along the tourism value chain were released by World Health Organization in May 2020 (UNWTO, 2020). Ministry of Tourism, Government of India (GOI) also came out with SOPs for the hospitality, Travel and tourism (Dash & Sharma, 2021). As preparatory and precautionary measures for Kumbh Mela 2021, GOI at the center and Uttarakhand Government at the state level gave periodic updates and instruction on the SOPs to be followed for its citizens. Having good SOPs is not enough, but the implementation is paramount. Many media reports highlighted flouting of the SOPs during the Kumbh Mela for various reasons like managing large crowds in the limited space to maintain social distancing and limited space for testing and isolation (Aljazeera, 2021). The local administration and the local community share the responsibility along with the tourists to follow the safety measures.

This research looks at the execution of the Kumbh Mela 2021 through the perspective of the local host community. Local communities play a vital role in planning and execution of mega events. Their needs, wants, concerns and apprehensions play a considerable role towards the policies of tourism. Locals' attitude towards mega events and festivals vary across demographics (Papastathopoulos, et.al., 2020) but their wellbeing, attachment and support for festival tourism like that of Kumbh Mela is extremely important. Encouraging, motivating and supporting local stakeholders are of prime importance especially in the post COVID times when domestic and faith tourism are on the rise. While tourism related stress has been a big concern amongst the host community, the added risk of COVID-19 infection dulls the pro-tourism behavior observed in some host communities (Woosnam et.al, 2021). By understanding the perspectives of the local host communities and residents a transformative and conductive host-guest relationship could be forged. In times when a mega event like Kumbh Mela was held during the deadly second wave of COVID-19, after-effects on the host community are sever and plenty. It then becomes vital to study the post event opinions of the host community.

III. Research Methodology

1. An extensive survey of secondary data in terms of literary sources, books, research papers, news articles etc was conducted to understand the importance of Kumbh Mela and possible reasons for organizing this mega event amid the pandemic.
2. A pilot survey was conducted with the help of semi structured interviews in the core area of Kumbh Mela, Hari-ki-Pauri. The pilot survey aimed at identifying key stakeholders amongst the host community who had got directly exposed to the virus during Kumbh Mela. Shopkeepers, hoteliers, security personnel, health workers and the common public were found to be the key stakeholders-
3. Based on the observations from the pilot survey and secondary data, detailed questionnaire was developed to analyse the research objectives about the perception of identified stakeholders towards the organizing, conducting of Kumbh Mela 2021 and post event consequences.
4. The detailed survey invited views from 109 respondents across all identified stakeholders. 20-22 respondents from each category were selected randomly at Hari-ki-Pauri site and interviewed in detail with help of questionnaires in December 2021. The questionnaire developed for the research had two parts of close and open ended questions. The first part of close ended questions in the form of Google forms were filled by the participants on site during the survey. A wide range of contrasting options were given in the close ended questions to encourage the participants to give honest opinions. The second part comprised of open ended questions in the form of schedule filled by the surveyors for the participating respondents. Additional one on one interviews (telephonic) were also conducted for better clarity and corroboration of data. There was all the effort made to eliminate any bias which will influence the findings. Staying true to the inductive reasoning approach this research incorporated various themes raised or highlighted by the participants of the pilot survey.
5. In order to gain clearer insights, statistical test of Chi square was employed. This empirical research involves quantitative, qualitative and comparative analysis of the data collected from the host community of Hari-ki-pauri, Haridwar. The results were collated and analysed to understand the perspectives of hosts in the critical host-guest-government relationships.

IV. Findings of RO1: To analyze the public opinion on the opportunities and challenges while conducting Kumbh Mela 2021.

The respondents justified and supported the economic, socio-cultural and political rationale behind organizing Kumbh Mela 2021. It was important to analyze the opportunities and challenges, according to them. The people were asked for their opinion on the actual staging of the event, where they gave their feedback on aspects like standard operating procedures (SOPs) and relevant training.

There were two aspects of the SOPs which had to be empirically evaluated: Their practicality/ ease of implementation and their actual implementation. 35.8% of the people surveyed choose not to reply on either. While 16.5% of the people felt that the SOPs like checking every check-in's RT-PCR test, checking for tick mark on every guest's hand (dorsal side) and discouraging people over 60 and under 10 from leaving the guest house were impractical, almost half of the people surveyed (47.7%) opined that the SOPs were good. When asked about the implementation of the SOPs a minority of 17.4% said that the SOPs were strictly followed. In spite of penal action as a deterrent for non-compliance of SOPs, a significant percentage of the people surveyed (46.8%) agreed that the SOPs weren't strictly followed.

To understand the relation between quality/practicality of the SOPs designed and their implementation, Chi square test was used (Table I and Table II) to investigate the hypothesis Ho1- '*SOPs were practical but not strictly implemented*'.

Table I: Responses for H₀1 for RO 1

	SOPs were implemented	SOPs were not implemented	Total
SOPs were Practical	17	35	52
SOPs were not practical	2	16	18
	19	51	70

Los (level of significance)=0.05

Degree of freedom= (No of R-1)(No of C-1)= (2-1)(2-1)=1

CV= $\chi^2_{1,0.05} = 3.841$

E=(Total of R * Total of C)/N (RT*CT)/N

Table II: Chi square for H₀1 for RO 1

Sno	Observed value(O)	Expected value (E)	O-E	(O-E) ²	$\chi^2=(O-E)^2/E$
1	17	14	3	9	0.6428
2	2	5	-3	9	1.8
3	35	38	-3	9	0.2368
4	16	13	3	9	0.6923
			$\Sigma(O-E)=0$		$\Sigma \chi^2=3.3719$

As computed value 3.3719 is lesser than table value 3.841, hence we do not reject the null hypothesis, it means SOPs were practical but not strictly implemented. When asked if the SOPs were backed by any training programmes/tutorials/guidelines a clear majority (83.5%) of the people said that none were imparted. 85% of the people who got some form of training said that SOPs were followed as against 17.6% of those who said they hadn't received any training; indicating a need for proper training programs in order for proper implementation.

V. Findings of RO2: To evaluate the perspectives of local people on post event consequences of Kumbh Mela 2021

After studying the perspectives of the local people on the motivations behind organizing and conducting the Kumbh Mela, perspectives were taken on the post event consequences.

When asked if respondents felt if their life was endangered because of the Kumbh Mela, surprisingly 62.4% of the people said no. COVID-19 related lockdowns and closures according to the locals left the economy in complete disarray and Kumbh Mela then was a welcome distraction and respite.

Tourism is an important source of revenue for the people of Hari-ki-pauri and when asked if they believed that the state government should put more political will in promoting tourism, a majority of 71.6 % said yes, tourism should be given more importance. Only 22% of the people thought that the full potential of Uttarakhand as a tourist destination was fully realized.

Pre and post Kumbh Mela opinions of the stakeholders were analyzed to check for any change of opinion. When Participants were asked if they supported the government and agreed with the decision to host Kumbh Mela in April 2021 an overwhelming majority (89%) of the people had agreed. When asked if they would continue to support hosting of such an event (post Kumbh Mela: amidst Omicron SARS-CoV-2 variant threat) only 33.9% of the people said yes. Chi square test was applied (Table V and Table VI) to check the hypothesis: Ho2- 'People's opinion on hosting mega events like Kumbh Mela has not changed since Kumbh Mela 2021 and Omicron outbreak'.

Table III: Responses for H₀2 of RO 2

	Support for hosting Kumbh 2021	Support for hosting mega event after Kumbh 2021 (With Current Omicron risk)	
Yes	97	37	134
No	8	59	67
Maybe	4	13	17
	109	109	218

Los (level of significance)=0.05

Degree of freedom= (No of R-1)(No of C-1)= (3-1)(2-1)=2

CV= $\chi^2_{2,0.05}$ = 5.991

E=(Total of R * Total of C)/N (RT*CT)/N

Table IV: Chi square for H₀2 of RO2

S. No	Observed value(O)	Expected value (E)	O-E	(O-E) ²	$\chi^2=(O-E)^2/E$
1	97	67	30	900	13.4328
2	8	33.5	-25.5	650.25	19.4104
3	4	8.5	-4.5	20.25	2.3823
4	37	67	-30	900	13.4328
5	59	33.5	25.5	650.25	19.4104
6	13	8.5	4.5	20.25	2.3823
			$\Sigma(O-E)=0$		$\Sigma \chi^2= 70.451$

As computed value 70.451 is greater than table value 5.991, hence we reject the null hypothesis, it means People's opinion on hosting mega events like Kumbh Mela has changed since Kumbh Mela 2021 and Omicron outbreak.

VI. Inferences

Kumbh Mela is an important mega event for the people of Haridwar, who are involved with the Kumbh Mela with a lot of passion as they look at it as a matter of pride and of immense religious importance. Locals supported the government's decision of hosting the Kumbh Mela. It was found that in public opinion CM's removal and hosting of Kumbh Mela were not separate political decisions. Decision to host the Kumbh Mela was made primarily to help the locals and their economy by the way of tourism according to those surveyed. Local's decision to vote will be positively affected by the government's decision of hosting the Kumbh Mela; highlighting political motivations along with socio-economic gains behind holding this mega event.

SOPs issued by various state and central authorities of tourism, health and disaster management were well drawn, detailed and practical but were not properly implemented. Physical/special constraints of the city, scale of people attending the event and lack of training were few reasons behind poor implementation of the SOPs.

Local people of Hari-ki-pauri area did not believe that their lives were endangered because of Kumbh Mela 2021. They did not support hosting such mega events in the post Kumbh Mela scenario especially when the Omicron outbreak threat was looming. People's opinion on hosting of mega events during ongoing endemics or pandemics changed as a post event consequence.

VII. Conclusions

All events of mass gatherings pose threat for transmission of communicable diseases. Organizing Kumbh Mela 2021 by Government of India amidst the COVID 19 pandemic, attracted attention and criticism from the entire world. The mega event was a matter of pride and faith for the Indian Hindu population. The host community facing the high risk acknowledged the event to be of immense cultural, social and economic

importance and also seemed to be supporting the Government for organizing the event. In such scenario, cancelling mega events may not be the best choice available inspite of the severe health risks involved. However, inspite of people's support for the event and well drafted SOPs, lack of adequate training and poor execution resulted in change of public opinion. It was found that the people's opinion also changed after experiencing the severe consequences and they were not supportive for hosting such mega events in future during epidemics and pandemics. The studies for Kumbh Mela 2021 are important for understanding the socio-cultural importance of such events and their implications on the host communities especially in the context of spreading of communicable diseases. The studies can be useful for understanding the critical relationships between host-guest-government in exceptional circumstances. Organizing and conducting such mega events in future can draw important insights from this research.

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